Best Practices in Civic Education:
What Does "Good" Look Like?

Evaluation of law-related education conducted in the early 1980s identified six best practices, which have been updated and expanded to reflect more recent research in teaching and learning, prevention, and civic education. Particularly influential in revising these best practices for the 21st century was the *Civic Mission of Schools* report and the research on which it rests. While best practices are always evolving, current research suggests the following are key elements of powerful civic education programs:

1. **Deliberate focus on outcomes related to student engagement in civic and political life**, such as students' propensity to vote, to work on local problems, to join voluntary associations, and to follow the news. Educators should explicitly encourage students to be civically and politically engaged.

2. **Focus on essential civic/law-related knowledge and skills**. This knowledge includes legal literacy focusing on civil, criminal, and constitutional themes; practical information about the law and public policy; and concepts underlying our constitutional democracy. Skills include critical thinking (e.g., decision making, problem solving) and social participation (e.g., communication, cooperation, and empathy). All other aspects of practice must be linked to the essential civic knowledge and skills targeted as outcomes.

3. **Judicious selection and presentation of issues and materials**. Materials should be selected so that they provide a balanced view of the judicial system and other aspects of our political system. Controversy is also important, as it motivates student interest. Finally, treatment of legal and constitutional issues should be characterized by depth of analysis.

4. **Sufficient quantity of instruction**. While "sufficient quantity" is not a precisely defined term, programs where civics, government or law is a semester course or is carefully integrated into a yearlong course represent the quantity the early research suggests is needed. Particularly intense programs of shorter duration may also meet this criterion. Programs that begin early in a student's school career and provide ongoing reinforcement are more likely to be effective than programs where civic education is concentrated in one course.

5. **Use of hands-on, active teaching strategies, particularly strategies that foster true student interaction and provide opportunities to share and**

develop respect for different points of view. Two key teaching approaches recommended in the CMS report as best practices are **classroom discussion of current controversial issues** and **participation in simulated democratic processes**, which give the school curriculum a "real-life" connection. Other characteristics of sound instruction (sharing objectives with students, drawing on students' existing knowledge and linking that knowledge to new information, multiple opportunities to practice skills, etc.) are also important.

6. **Repeated opportunities for students to interact with community resource persons who have been well prepared for constructive interaction with students.** The content presented by resource persons should be integrated with course content and the **principal mode of visitors' activities should involve interaction with students**. Connections to the community can also be provided through service learning, which, when it deliberately addresses civic outcomes and links to the curriculum, can contribute to development of engaged citizens.

7. **Active involvement of administrators.** Administrators are involved in providing classroom resources, facilitating field experiences, and dealing with concerns voiced by other teachers or members of the community. Involvement of administrators is also key to helping students understand how their schools are governed and how they can have input in school governance. In addition, administrative support is critical in ensuring that civic education programs are designed for all students, especially those who might otherwise be disengaged.

8. **Support networks and professional development for teachers.** Collaboration and networking make the challenging work of civic education easier for teachers. Ongoing professional development in which teachers have a voice is also critical to successful civic education.